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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a university German teacher's experience using the file transfer capabilities of the Blackboard Internet tool. The introduction highlights some of the features and advantages of Blackboard. The first section discusses teacher empowerment, noting that the Internet empowers the teacher by providing the wealth of the world's knowledge, and Blackboard empowers the teacher by providing a portal through which to narrow the breadth of information. The second section addresses ways that Blackboard supports organization. The third section looks at how Blackboard addresses issues of accessibility. (MES)

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My Beloved Blackboard: Teacher Empowerment for Students' Success

By Elizabeth Caplan-Carbin

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Eighth Annual
Mid-South Instructional Technology Conference
Teaching, Learning, & Technology
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March 30-April 1, 2003

2003 Conference Proceedings

My Beloved Blackboard: Teacher Empowerment for Students' Success

By: Elizabeth Caplan-Carbin

Track 2 - Innovation and Future Implementation in Instructional Technology
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Abstract

Announcements, assignments, exercises, and animated instructional presentations - Blackboard brings it all to everyone, any time, anywhere. This paper describes a university German teacher's experience getting organized and getting it all "out there" through the file transfer capabilites of the powerful Internet tool. Overwhelm learners with input, yet keep it all under control through the adaptable organizational menus. Give them an abundance of learning avenues, while keeping their objectives specific and clear.

Proceeding

Announcements, assignments, exercises, and animated instructional presentations - Blackboard brings it all to everyone, any time, anywhere. This paper describes a university German teacher's experience getting organized and getting it all "out there" through the file transfer capabilities of the powerful Internet tool. Overwhelm learners with input, yet keep it all under control through the adaptable organizational menus. Give them an abundance of learning avenues, while keeping their objectives specific and clear.

Blackboard has become an invaluable tool for teaching with technology, for exploiting the assets of the Internet, and for making materials accessible to an expandingly diverse learning community. The use of sound, video, authentic texts, photos and other graphics, can be brought into a classroom during instruction or directly into a student's dormroom at midnight, with minimal fuss or

concern about platforms, hardware, or even software issues. Multimedia provides multiple avenues for learners to interact with instructional material: reading, listening, playing, exploring. The variety of venue; text, audio, graphic, and video, caters to the variety of learning preferences, and the quantity of content, organized into both layers and linear increments, provides avenues for top-down and bottom-up conceptual learning, for explicit instruction, as well as inductive discovery. Educational treasures found on the Internet are easily gathered and incorporated into the course syllabus. Your own documents, presentations, and programs can be uploaded to Blackboard for retrieval by your students or by you at any time, any place. Your teaching tools and course materials are always available to you and to whomever you want, whenever you want. Accessibility to materials is always at the administrator's, that is your, discretion.

Two aspects of Blackboard make it an extraordinary tool for ordinary teachers. First, the files are all kept on Blackboard servers. That means that it is not necessary to own a computer to use Blackboard. The course website can be administered from any computer terminal to the Internet, such as at the library, or in an Internet café, at a friend's, or while away at a conference. The second feature, invaluable to teachers, is that the entire course can be archived for future use. Each element that the teacher inputs into the course can be delineated for "timed release". This means that the course can be made to "build" in chapter or unit increments, just as it did as you built it the first time. Everything placed onto Blackboard can be edited, removed or simply hidden until you want it to appear. Blackboard can serve as a virtual "file cabinet" for your course materials and ideas, while making it easier for you to share and disseminate them.

Teacher Empowerment

I have been empowered in my job as a teacher because I always have a vast store of knowledge and answers at my fingertips. It is not incumbent upon me, and my little memory bank, to know all there is to know, or to have the perfect answer to every question, because I know how to find the answers.

As a non-native speaking teacher of German, the use of the Internet in classes has given me superb confidence that I am providing students with authentic input for their German language acquisition. I can bring them sound samples and textual examples from any peripheral field or topic.

For example, after September 11, 2001, our interests naturally shifted from the curriculum at hand, but the Internet allowed a blending of German and current affairs. While no one felt motivated to learn German in those first days, they were indeed interested in the news coming out of Germany at that time. By reading German news sites, we all learned information that only later was presented by American media. We even continued to work with aspects of the story that were only pursued through the German media.

In this case, the Internet empowered me by enabling me to switch gears and adopt a new and novel plan to accomplish the same goals I had started out with. I

never stopped teaching German, I just started using a different "text". Most recently the Internet has empowered me to continue teaching my discipline, while orienting more toward the students own concerns, and thereby, more toward immediate relevancy. Grammar lessons embedded within current German news articles are more relevant because the riddles to be solved by sorting out the language codes are the answers to the students' own questions. For example, "What is Germany's foreign policy toward the U.S.?" The Internet empowers the teacher by providing the wealth of the world's knowledge. Blackboard empowers the teacher by providing a sort of portal through which to narrow the breadth of information.

Organization

Organization is perhaps the most important boon that Blackboard adds to enhance a student's chance at success. The disorganized student, who misplaces handouts, leaves books in the car, forgets where the syllabus is, or when the assignments are due, etc. is aided immensely by the fact that the syllabus, assignments, and handouts are always available for viewing and printing.

You can be assured that your students can always find the course homepage. Every student enrolled in your class has been given the necessary ID and password to enter the university Blackboard system. They need remember only the simplest of URLs to find their way. For example, students of UT-Martin can type in www.utm.edu, and there is a handy link directly to Blackboard. If they are enrolled in a course, there will be a link to that course on their Blackboard homepage.

Its easy to access your Blackboard homepage from computers anywhere in the world. No student ever has to miss a handout or an assignment, because they weren't in class the day it was assigned, or because they lost their book bag.

A blackboard coursepage has customizable buttons that lead students to major content areas, such as the course syllabus, assignments, faculty information, and announcements.

Announcements can help to draw attention to newly posted content. They are automatically posted at the front of the coursepage, and they appear on the student's own blackboard homepage, that is, before they enter any specific coursepage. While the menu buttons can be changed, thereby changing the organization of the coursepage, there is a given range of content areas that are encompassed within a Blackboard coursepage. This gives the teacher the freedom to customize the site along with focused guidelines that are helpful for getting important elements of the course online quickly.

The course options allow you to change the course settings, and rename the content areas, but your coursepage always begins with a set of logical settings from which to depart. This makes Blackboard easy to get started with, and

provides the student a large measure of consistency among Blackboard coursepages.

A Blackboard coursepage helps everyone to stay organized. Teachers can disseminate materials as soon as they are ready - no waiting for the copy machine to be repaired, for instance. Handouts and homework assignments can be posted in advance of classes, saving class time that would otherwise be spent distributing paper. Blackboard's material distribution features save time, paper, and eliminate most excuses concerning missing materials or assignments. As Loyola University's professor of music, David Swanzy (2001), notes in his list of Blackboard observations, logical navigation is essential to well designed instructional modules. Swanzy is most impressed with the simplicity of using Blackboard for "the delivery of lecture notes and traditional handouts by uploading them for student viewing or retrieval. Such use may be mastered even without a training session because of the user-friendly guidance Blackboard has provided." i.

Call it guidance or micromanagement, Blackboard does help you get a course up and running very quickly. My courses usually have a button labeled "Assignments". This was one of the limited choices available to me in setting up the course areas. I didn't have to 'remember' it, I only had to select it. By having limited choices in the instructional design, the teacher can focus on the content within each area, leaving the high level instructional design to the Blackboard programmers. The choices available still give tremendous versatility in course design. Activities can be organized into various areas that help the student decide the direction of their studies.

I've labeled a content area "Lab" which gives the students suggestions as to how to spend their time in the language lab. Here, I have provided access to websearches, quizforms, sound files, and links to video sites, such as news programs from German radio and TV.

With some success, I had been providing electronic content for language learning since 1996, through websites called "Deutsch im Netz" and "German Online Interactive" (now webgerman.com), as well as through homepages customized for each course I taught.

I had also provided animated Powerpoint presentations and original webexercises. I had created email distribution lists so that I could send all my students emails or websites the minute I thought of it. While these avenues of presentation addressed many issues of education, they were still only available to those savvy, able, and willing to access them. Savvy in terms of skill at Internet research; knowing how to find things, and "get to places" and remembering where you've been and how to get there again; knowing how to use bookmarks and history files, search engines, and online resources like dictionaries and reference sites: Able in terms of having the necessary hardware and connections to reach the resources: And willing in terms of simply putting in the effort to keep track of URL addresses and to spend time visiting, surfing, reading, interacting, and responding, etc. - in other words, willing to use the Internet for active learning.

Because they were "wrapped" in attractive novelty, Internet coursepages, interactive webexercises, and animated grammar presentations went a long way toward making the subject matter more accessible to students. By serving as a single, simple to reach, starting point, Blackboard goes farther.

Accessibility

It is no surprise that Blackboard addresses issues of accessibility so thoroughly. The software is designed and continually updated to address the points of Section 508 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1998.ii This section requires all federal agencies to enable full access to the Federal government's electronic and information technology, including, but not limited to, assistive technologies for people with disabilities. The original Blackboard design architecture, as well as the updates and amendments, follow each point of Section 508 in an effort to maximize accessibility and to implement the prescriptions of the federal directive. For example, alternate text and file descriptions help support non-textual elements, such as images or sound files. The software also works with screen readers, such as JAWS for Windows, which audially "reads" the screen elements, designated by the instructor, and/or provides a printout in Braille. Blackboard developers are also partners in collaboration with several organizations dedicated to increasing Internet accessibility, such as the federal grant initiative with Utah State University and the TLT Group in a Learning Anywhere Anytime Project (LAAP), called, Web Accessibility In Mind (WebAIM), with the goal of educating instructors, administrators, and course designers on how to build accessible online learning environments. iii

With consultants and focus group studies of the Helen A. Kellar Institute for Human Disabilities, Blackboard developers collaborate with the SALT Partnership, or Standards For Accessible Learning Technologies, promoting access specifications and effective models that enable people with disabilities to have equal access to the expanding learning resources online.

Blackboard's control panel forms prompt the course administrator (you) to enter elements that meet the standard of Section 508. For example, complex graphics, such as charts, graphs, or animated images, can be accompanied by alternative titles and detailed text descriptions. Every image, Java applet, Flash file, video or audio file, plug-in, or anything else uploadable, can, and should, have an alt description. When a purely decorative graphic is used, such as an interesting horizontal line or a pointing finger, the alt description should be empty (alt-""), but not "missing." Blackboard "knows" this and automatically avoids the error when you leave the "alternative" textbox blank, thereby avoiding the unnecessary increase in the time it takes to listen to a page using a screen reader.

The technology helps average learners to overcome typical student handicaps: lack of initiative, effort, efficacy, interest, and organization. In a study concerned with "building a supportive online instructional environment for reluctant, apprehensive, and/or under-prepared learners," Dr. Kathryn Jansak, feels that "encouraging reliance on [the Blackboard web] site eases student reluctance to engage the medium and work effectively within it."iv Thus it goes a long way

toward student success by increasing their access to information. Blackboard also increases students' ability to deliver their work to the instructor - giving the instructor better access to students. Students can pose questions through the discussion boards, drop their work off in the digital dropbox, or attach it to an email right through the Blackboard portal. Blackboard quizzes and surveys are even graded and recorded in the online gradebook automatically.

The gradebook is a major tool of empowerment for me. It helps me to keep class time on the teaching task and to avoid spending time on administrative concerns. Students are always apprised of their grades and of what assignments they are missing, or of how their attendance scores are dwindling. They can even see how their scores stack up against the class average, which sometimes sparks a competitive motivation. Having constant access to their grades helps students to succeed because they are kept informed of their progress and reminded of the requirements for success.

Having clear objectives and access to schedules, assignments, handouts, and help empowers the student with the organizational structure to succeed. Target language input made available through a broad variety of avenues assists a broader variety of learning style preferences. The Blackboard platform makes it easier than ever to disseminate multimedia, and multimedia makes it easier to bring instructional content to the attention of students.

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